



Language Variation in Odisha – Switching and Mixing of Codes

Dr Nikunja Kishore Sa

Asst. Professor (English), Radhanath IASE, Cuttack, Odisha, India

Article Info

Received: 26 Apr 2026,

Received in revised form: 24 May 2026,

Accepted: 28 May 2026,

Available online: 02 Jun 2026

Keywords— Language family, Dialect, Dialect Continuum, Code-Switching, Code-Mixing, Diglossia, Bilingual, Multilingual

©2026 The Author(s). Published by AI Publications. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

Abstract

Language is a complex social, cultural and geographical phenomenon. Language being a system of systems is also celebrate as an abstraction of abstractions. These abstractions being in shape of dialects, sociolects and idiolects etc. must be studied thoroughly in order to get a comprehensive view. Hence, besides what linguistic components form language, it becomes important to note that in which geographical area it is spoken and in which society and culture it is used. In the present paper the topic of discourse is Odia language, spoken in the Eastern part of India. A sociolinguistic study of this language shows how this language being an important Indo-Aryan language and an official language of the state of Odisha which is placed in the VIIIth schedule of the Indian constitution, also exhibits a considerable variation across the state. Extensive examples have been presented to confirm the sociolinguistic study. The contact and relationship of the users, the dialectical variation, the context and purpose of the discourse are highlighted to show the typical code switching and code mixing phenomenon prevailing in this multilingual state along with the factors involved in such processes.

I. INTRODUCTION: CODES IN ODISHA

Odisha is a state in India where the primary language used is Odia. This is also the official language of the state. Because of its over 1500 years of recorded history and linguistic identity it is recognised by Indian Government as a Classical Language being the sixth one to win this feat after Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada, and the recent inclusions (in 2024) are Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Asamese and Bengali. In a multilingual country like India with above 1600 languages as per Census of India, Odia language has more than 50 million speakers. Once Persian was its official language during pre-British occupancy and after that English used to be the language of Education. After independence, English still has

its strong roots within the society, and is the aspiration of all most all the Odia people. English has been the informal official language, the language which can be used with certain expertise by any educated person of the region.

There is also another Austroasiatic Mundari group of languages such as Santhali, Munda, Ho, Gond, Kolh, Bhumij, Juang, Kharia, Sora and Remo etc. Further, since Odisha shares its borders with Andhra Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, West Bengal and Jharkhand the language contact is also unique with the speakers of these states. In addition to this list, the languages which are associated with or recognised in other state of the country are frequently used in Odisha. The languages such as Bengali,

Gujurati, Sindhi, Punjabi, Hindi and Telugu etc. can be enlisted under this category.

Odia language has also has several varieties such as Sambalpuri, Berhampur, Baleswari, Mayurbhanja, Desia (Koraputia), Sundargadi and Kendujharia etc. These varieties can have their claim as identified dialects. A dialect continuum also plays across the state as the degree of intelligibility gradually decreases with respect to the increase in geographical distance between them. The distinct phonetic dissimilarity can be easily noted between them. Even a dialect like Sambalpuri is strengthening its roots for claiming a separate language status. The Cuttack or Khordha variety of Odia language has a known standardised identity. Cuttack being the oldest city of above 2000 years and having the old Legislative Assembly, High Court and after all the then place of printing press, its local dialect got standardised and came into the text books, political proceedings or general administration. However, in the present context there is an undercurrent of conflict in relation to the concept of standardisation because of the establishment of local literature, music, social media etc.

Therefore, in this paper, it is suitable to use the term 'code' in place of 'language' while doing a sociolinguistic study of language variation. It is important to note Gleason's comment when he says that 'A code is an arbitrary, pre-arranged set of signals. A language is merely a special variety of code; and the science of linguistics deals, in its strictest delimitation, only with this aspect of communication.' (p.374). Thus, we can say that the particular dialect or language that a person chooses to use on any occasion is a 'code', which is a system used for communication between two or more parties. When there is bilingual or even multilingual situation in the state of Odisha, the people usually select a particular code whenever they choose to speak and also switch from one code to another or mix codes as per their requirements. In this multilingual situation the choice of code is too complex, and it is noticed that many people are amazing bilinguals so that even it is really difficult the guess their own mother tongue. Considering this, my aim is to bring about those issues, which make the users

choose the proper code and facilitate themselves to maintain in the society.

II. CODE-SWITCHING

Sometimes a situation arises when the speaker needs to go beyond its normal communication group for establishing better or required interpersonal relationship so that they need to adopt a different conversational strategy by selecting other feasible codes. This is known as Code-Switching. The actual choice of code on the part of the bilinguals can be a difficult task. For example, the Juanga tribes in northern part of Odisha speak a very peculiar language which is confined to themselves within a small radius of area containing 30 to 40 people. This language has certainly differences to an extent to other Juanga society. These people when come to their local market, the language they use is a kind of local variety of Odia with which all most all Juangas are comfortable. They have never been taught Odia formally but the situation forces them to use Odia as a matter of demand from the external society on which they are dependent. Conversely, if an outsider goes to their society and totally unknown about their language he will not be received well. It so happens often that they hide themselves when they see their outside visitors those who look polished, educated or officer-like. It is seen that there is no such well-marked mutual intelligibility between the two languages of Juanga to that of Odia whereas a normal Juanga can comfortably communicate in Odia as a social need and switches from his own code to Odia.

In regard to the above case mentioned, it becomes necessary to study what might cause a speaker to switch from a language to another or from one variety to another variety. A number of answers have been suggested, including solidarity with listeners, choice of topic, and perceived social and cultural distance:

Solidarity with Listeners:

It is the feeling of oneness in the society that develops the team spirit and we exhibit a kind of solidarity with the other participants of the society. That is why the language selected to communicate should befriend the speaker with his fellow listeners. This has an integrative aim as well as instrumental aim. A teacher from

Cuttack (using standard variety) appointed in Sambalpur will want to use Sambalppuri in his classroom for better understanding of the students whereas the political leaders in their election campaign will also learn and consciously use the local variety in order to attract the public. Here, the former can be seen as integrative in contrast to the latter's instrumental purpose.

Choice of Topic:

Choice of a code is also dependent on the choice of topic. A formal parliamentary proceeding will choose a formal and acclaimed standard variety which rather the educated ones use whereas a topic involving health check up in rural areas will look for a more localised variety. Also, if we examine the language used to teach mathematics is different from the language used in literature. It is seen even a person from Sambalpur addressing to a public in Sambalpur will never use Sambalpur while talking about agriculture, Science etc.

Social and Cultural Distance:

This is very common in any multilingual situation especially where there is class-consciousness. The dominant group want others to follow their code and merge into their own culture. In some cases, the working classes are to be addressed in the same code by the upper mass as the latter gives a psychological reminder of the class they belong to. Moreover, in its democratic set up of Odisha, people observe the social and cultural aspects of each other and choose a suitable code for communication. For example, in a rural school a teacher asks a boy about his untidiness:

'Anga nai dhui kishain?'

(Why have you not washed your shirt?)

Which in standard variety will be

'Shirt kan pain sapha kari nahan?'

The above variety is Mayurbhanjia and mostly spoken in the border regions of Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts such as Jashipur, Singda and Turumunga etc. It has normally a colloquial use among many illiterates and poor people. But when the persons from this locality become educated they do not use this variety, even in their own place.

Educational Supremacy:

It has been a psychological entity to prove oneself more privileged through one's education which gives prestige in the society. English has been seen not as a foreign language but as an important language in the official proceedings and other formal occasions. Keeping this in view, the parents have become more conscious to provide English medium education to their children. In this state it is easily found people switching to English when they find an obstacle in compiling their work especially in offices.

These points discussed here sum up that the motivation is an important factor to consider the choice of the code. Again this motivation need not be conscious at all because it has been observed that many speakers are not aware of their use of a language or particular variety rather than the other. That is, they can unconsciously switch from one to another. The code-switching, in relation to this, can be of two types: situational and metaphorical.

Situational Code-Switching:

This form occurs when the languages used change according to the situations in which the speakers find themselves. They speak one language in one situation and another in a different one. No topic change is involved. In case of situational code-switching one variety is used in a certain set of situations and another in an entirely different set. However, the changeover from one to the other may be instantaneous. Sometimes, the situations are so socially prescribed that they can even be taught as in the cases associated with ceremonial or religious functions. In a typical Hindu family the priest in Odisha chants his religious lines in Sanskrit while performing a marriage ceremony and on the same place he will use Odia to communicate other members present there. Again, the choice of Odia follows a special register that is highly literary or bookish.

Metaphorical Code-Mixing:

When a change of topic requires a change in the language used we have metaphorical code-switching. Metaphorical code-switching has an affective dimension to it. One changes the code as one redefines the situation - formal to informal, official to personal, serious to humorous, politeness to solidarity. We can trace

a fine piece of example in a typical tribal society of Odisha where the speakers of Santali and Munda are to be treated under the same cast and the marriages in these communities are frequent. Now Santali has got the status to be a script language and the language approved by the Govt. of India. Even though some prestige is involved in using Santali, still the man proposing a girl from Munda community has to use her code that involves the emotions and reciprocity of the feeling. This shows how speakers employ a particular code to convey information that goes beyond their actual words, especially to define social situations.

III. CODE-MIXING

During conversation when the users use both the languages together such that they change from one language, we call this phenomenon Code-Mixing. This is otherwise known as conversational code mixing. It is a deliberate attempt on the part of the speaker even without any need for the change of topic. There is always a silent demand for sufficient knowledge in two selected codes for both the speaker as well as the listener. In Odisha context this is a common phenomenon and also a source of pride.

The influence of English in the day to day life is so rich that many English words have already been accepted into Odia vocabulary system. The following sample of Odia will show how frequently these people use English in their conversation in a local code:

- i) *'Railway station re friend ku see off kala pare dinner karibi'*

(I will have my dinner after I see off my friend at railway station.)

- ii) *'Aajikaali office ra management katha na kahiba better'*

(It is better not to speak about the management of the office these days.)

- iii) *'Mo situation ebe bhari danger achhi. Next week ku solve hoijiba'*

(Now my situation is danger. It will be solved by next week.)

All these sentences show how frequently the code-switching occurs in Odia society where

the second language get mixed is normally English. Apart from that one can find code-mixing in radio or television broadcast when they mean to interact with their listeners or audience especially in programmes like dance and music reality shows, political debates, and interviews etc.

In Odisha, most people living in Berhampur can speak Telugu which is the standard code of the neighbour state of Andhra Pradesh. These people are well-versed in standard Odia, Berhampuri dialect of Odia along with Telugu simultaneously. Odia and Telugu belong to two different language groups – Aryan and Dravidian respectively. Thus, people in Berhampur or Ganjam District at large are amazing bilinguals. It is seen that the influence of Telugu has made their Odia phonologically heavily accented, but their competency in standard Odia cannot be denied. This situation can be linguistically confirmed as diglossia as here the users are not only used to code-mixing but also consciously switch from one variety to another. Hudson's observation of code-mixing explains this situation better: 'In code-switching the point at which the languages change corresponds to a point where the situation changes, either on its own or precisely because the language changes. There are other cases, however, where a fluent bilingual talking to another fluent bilingual changes language without any change at all in the situation... The purpose of code-mixing seems to be to symbolise a somewhat ambiguous situation for which neither language on its own would be quite all right. To get the right effect the speakers balance the two languages against each other...' (p.53).

IV. CONCLUSION

Odisha is a remarkable place from the multilingualism point of view. Its official language Odia is very old and has been recognised as a classical language by Indian Govt. Most people are bilinguals and frequently can speak English, Hindi along with their own Odia. Even Odia has its own established dialects. Out of them Sambalpuri language is on the claim for language status because of its increasing strength in literature and music world. Many tribals speak Santali, which got its language

status in Indian Constitution in 2003. Many other Mundari languages are also claiming for such status. This study on using codes in such a complex multilingual society shows how certain social conditions involve as well as guide the personality of a speaker to participate well in that society with other language users. There is flexibility in choice of codes – sometimes deliberate and at times it is conscious effort. However, the importance of English cannot be denied. People desire to be good users of English, and that is a prestige matter. So, very often English influences the phenomena of code-switching and code-mixing while speaking Odia language.

REFERENCES

- [1] Gleason, H.A. (1961): An introduction to Descriptive Linguistics, Holt Rinehart and Winston, New York.
- [2] Hudson, R.A. (1992): Sociolinguistics, CUP, Cambridge.
- [3] Malik, L. (1994): Sociolinguistics: A Study of Code-Switching, Anmol, New Delhi.
- [4] Muysken, P. (2000): Bilingual Speech: A Typology of Code-Mixing, CUP, Cambridge.
- [5] Trudgil, P. (1974): Sociolinguistics: An Introduction, Penguin, Harmondsworth.
- [6] Wardhaugh, R. (1986): An Introduction to Sociolinguistics, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.